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Transgender Policy and Practice Development for the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

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Higher Learning Commission Quality Initiative

Project Title: **Transgender Policy and Practice Development for the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University**

Executive Summary:

Transgender people within higher education continue to be an invisible, often forgotten community. Only about 10% of colleges and universities have trans-inclusive nondiscrimination statements. Research suggests that trans people face higher rates of harassment when compared to cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and are three times more likely to fear for their physical safety on campus. In the last decade, however, a number of campuses have become leaders in creating trans-friendly policies, programs, and practices.

At the time this initiative was proposed, neither the College of Saint Benedict (CSB) nor Saint John's University (SJU) had any established policies or practices regarding transgender or gender non-conforming students. Grounded in our respective missions and identities as Catholic and Benedictine institutions we are unwavering in our commitment to seeking and advancing the common good, while also insisting on respect for the dignity of all persons. As a liberal arts college for women (CSB) and a university with an undergraduate college of arts and sciences for men (SJU) we are also strongly committed to advancing gender equity as a component of the common good, as well as the holistic understanding that gender identity is integral to personal identity and the dignity of the human person.

Contemporary developments for understanding gender identity raise serious challenges to who we are institutionally and what we seek to do as a Catholic Benedictine liberal arts college for women and as a Catholic Benedictine university with an undergraduate college of arts and sciences for men. The question of what it means to be a woman or man becomes ever more complex when gender identity comes to be understood as fluid rather than stable, and perhaps especially when one's gender identity becomes disassociated from one's biological sex. For our institutions these new understandings highlight the apparent inconsistencies among our unexamined beliefs regarding the common good, the dignity of all persons and being a woman or man in the world.

The CSB and SJU Vice Presidents for Student Development led the effort to research and develop policies and practices that would guide the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University to be intentional with regard to the welcome, education, and services extended to transgender and gender non-conforming students in ways that are consistent with each of their respective institutional identities and missions as a Catholic Benedictine residential liberal arts college for women/men.

In spring 2015 the two vice presidents organized a working task force comprised of a core group of individuals representing a cross section of the two colleges who were interested in researching best practices on serving transgender and gender fluid students in colleges and universities. The group reviewed the NCAA guidance on *Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes*, and researched Catholic teaching on ministering to transgender persons, as well as the various policies and approaches taken by single sex and Catholic colleges and universities. In addition the task force researched developments in how transgender issues were playing out in Minnesota and nationally especially in the area of college

and high school athletics, and related public discourse prompted by the media coverage of the Bruce→Caitlin Jenner transition.

After vetting the various research findings, two different models of policies were drafted, and the task force settled on recommending a set of two parallel policies (one for each institution) each based up on the policy that had recently been adopted by Barnard College in June 2015.

Through the parallel policies drafted, we sought to incorporate the following guiding principles:

1. Re-affirmation of the historical identity and mission of our respective institutions and a recommitment to the ideals of the particular monastic community which sponsors each institution
2. Advancing the mission of each respective institution by acknowledging the evolving understandings of gender identity in our day
3. The intention to honor our deepest values (e.g., respect for community and the dignity of all persons) and traditions (Catholic, Benedictine, gender-focused) while dealing with evolving understandings of gender identity
4. Focusing the policies on Admission (i.e., describing who may be considered for acceptance into each institution)
5. Upholding our long-standing practice of accepting students as they present themselves to us without requiring them to prove their gender identity.
6. Re-affirmation that each institution is committed to serving all students who are accepted to the best of its ability while always remaining true to its own mission and identity.
7. That CSB will accept women and graduate students while SJU will accept men and graduate students.

An educational/learning process was then designed to roll out the proposed parallel policies to key constituents, and to elicit their feedback and support for moving forward. Our goal was to build strong grassroots buy-in for the proposal before inviting the trustees to approve the policy for their respective institution. The constituents which reviewed and gave input on the parallel policies included: the president's cabinets; the leadership of the two respective sponsoring monastic communities; the bishop of the local Catholic diocese; the two respective trustee committees on student development, the Admission and Financial Aid team, faculty and staff, and the student senates.

On February 4, 2016 the proposed parallel policies, as well as the rationale for them and the process through which the proposed policies had been vetted were presented to trustees of both institutions in a joint session. The discussion was lively with much support expressed, as well as a few strong voices which expressed opposition to or concerns about the proposed policies. We had originally planned to seek endorsement of the parallel policies at the next meeting (May 2016), but after this meeting we determined that we should pause on moving forward until fall 2016 so that trustees themselves might lead the charge for approval.

On November 18, 2016 in a joint trustee meeting, the CSB Trustees approved the proposed policy which had been endorsed by a unanimous vote of the CSB Student Senate on November 15, 2016. Likewise, on November 18, 2016 the SJU Trustees approved the proposed policy which had been endorsed by a unanimous vote the SJU Student Senate on November 14, 2016.

Research Question: How can the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University best serve transgender and/or gender non-conforming students who seek admission to our institutions?

Methodologies:

1. Research and review best practices for colleges in serving gender-nonconforming students
2. Research and review Catholic teaching and practice regarding transgender/gender non-conforming persons
3. Research and review institutional policies regarding transgender students for single sex colleges and Catholic colleges
4. Research and review policies regarding transgender student athletes including those of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Minnesota State High School League (MSHL), and member institutions of the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC)
5. Studied the 2016 ACPA monograph, *Developmental Pathways to Trans Inclusion on College Campuses*
6. Identification and prioritization of institutional values that could be called into question as we seek to address enrollment of transgender students
7. Modified focus groups (coordinate cabinet, monastic leadership, bishop, Trustee Committees on Student Development, faculty and staff, Student Development All-Staff, Student Senates)
8. Professional consultations (ACCU, USCCB)
9. Consult with legal counsel regarding the risk of potential challenges to our institutions related to the adoption of the proposed policies
10. Informal conversations with transgender persons ("Liam" and "Ann") and Gender Studies faculty

Lessons Learned:

1. The landscape of issues related to gender non-conformity is sensitive and challenging to many people for a variety of reasons.
2. The fear some people have about transgender issues is a real but an insufficient excuse for not moving forward.
3. Practices which support gender nonconforming persons in a specific gendered context can also extend support to persons with a variety of other issues (e.g., allowing students to opt for a "Preferred Name" as opposed to "Legal Name" can be helpful to students regardless of gender identity).
4. Many people besides gender-nonconforming persons appreciate having an option for privacy in locker rooms and restrooms.
5. When "faithfulness to tradition" meets "openness to new ways of understanding" the grace of paradox is revealed.

Groups worked with:

1. Task force
2. School of Theology faculty members
3. Gender Studies faculty members
4. Joint cabinet
5. Monastic community leadership (Abbot and Prioress)
6. SJU Trustees Committee on Student Development
7. CSB Trustees Committee on Student Development

8. CSB/SJU Office of Admission
9. Diocesan Bishop
10. President of Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
11. Staff consultant from United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
12. Legal Counsel
13. Barnard College
14. CSB and SJU Trustees
15. Student Development All Staff
16. Thursday Faculty Forum
17. Joint Student Senate
18. CSB Student Senate
19. SJU Student Senate
20. PRISM (*People Representing the Sexual Minority*, student club)
21. CSB Student Development Directors
22. SJU Student Development Directors
23. CSB Residential Life
24. SJU Residential Life
25. CSB Athletics
26. SJU Athletics
27. Registrar

Recommendations from the research:

- See “Proposed Parallel Admission Policies”
- See FAQ

Plans for ongoing research/campus work:

- Gender neutral bathroom facilities are being incorporated into all new buildings
- Areas studying/planning modifications that will be welcoming to gender-nonconforming persons include:
 - Admission
 - Athletics
 - Counseling and Health Promotion
 - Health Services
 - Recreation
 - Registrar
 - Residential Life

Sharing the Research:

- We shared our research internally via:
 - Thursday Forum Presentation (3/31/2016)
 - Student Development All Staff (4/7/2016)
 - Joint Student Senate Executive Session (4/13/2016)
- We anticipate sharing our research externally via a conference presentation at:
 - Association for Student Affairs at Catholic Colleges and Universities (Summer 2017)

Honest Appraisal of Perceptions from Working on this Initiative

From the beginning this initiative provided us with many opportunities to research, listen, think critically, challenge and be challenged about our own assumptions, and try to understand and empathize with differing perspectives which are all valued. We could see the landscape shifting around us with regard to gender identity, and we were excited to have this project as an entry point into a thoughtful consideration of this matter. This initiative prompted community wide learning about gender fluidity and non-traditional gender identities. It also prompted us to research Catholic doctrine regarding gender identity and to re-imagine what it means for us to be a Catholic Benedictine college for women and a Catholic Benedictine college for men.

This initiative challenged us to think expansively and boldly about how we honor our deepest values regarding the dignity of all people while remaining rooted in our heritage. In our conversations with others about this initiative, we found ourselves becoming prophetic as we asked and responded to challenging questions from powerful people.

In spite of the challenging nature of the initiative, we were often amazed at how our conversations and presentations were welcomed and so well-received. The affirmation we received from others on the research we had done and the case we made reassured us time and again that we had thoroughly worked through all the right issues. These experiences early on fortified us for dealing with frustration from delays which required us to make strategic detours so that the Trustees could be ready to approve the parallel policies we proposed.

We experienced frustration at not having our proposed policies approved at the May board meeting, but we were elated with the robust, yet highly respectful discussion and also (most especially) with the strong positive vote with which the CSB Trustees and the SJU Trustees approved the policies in joint session at the November 18, 2016 board meeting.

Our work on this project has changed the way we look at our programs and services. While the original question focused on how to best serve transgender and/or gender non-conforming students who seek admission to our institutions, we realize it goes so much further beyond just admission. Our work moving forward calls us to be attentive to creating and sustaining an inclusive ecosystem for transgender and gender non-conforming students so that they may experience our campuses as richly and fully as any other student and so that they can achieve academic and personal success.

In summary, this was an exciting project that prompted all of us and others to stretch our imaginations, and grow in our critical thinking all while becoming more deeply rooted in the values that make us who we are and who we aspire to become.